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The apophatic knowledge in philosophy and theology. Emil Cioran Versus Dumitru Stăniloae

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Abstract. Two of the most enlightened minds of the Romanian people cross their feather quills in a subject of immeasurable depth. Both driven by the longing for God, they relate to Him from different perspectives, perspectives from which different conclusions result. One is a convinced nihilist, who cannot help but think of God, and the other an accomplished theologian, who transforms the knowledge of God into authentic living by His will. The parallel between Emil Cioran and Dumitru Stăniloae on the topic of apophatic knowledge can only impress any knowledge-loving reason.

Keywords. God, Cioran, Stăniloae, nihilism, apophatism

I. Introduction

Knowing God is perhaps the most sensitive subject that can be called into question by reason. For this reason, the two great sciences, philosophy and theology, express a form of apophatic knowledge, however, from different perspectives. The apophatic character of philosophy is not identical with that of theology, although it is expressed by the same term, for which reason, its understanding implies different results, depending on the perspective from which it is subjected to analysis.

The two great thinkers of the Romanian people, Emil Cioran and Father Dumitru Stăniloae, present through their feather quills, an impressive picture of the apophatic knowledge of God, the conclusions of the first being based on a deeply troubled knowledge. As for Father Stăniloae's theology, it often goes beyond rationality, expressing the inexpressible in human words, by living deeply in God. This form of living allows human reason to transcend itself and implicitly the rationality of the world and to express the revealed truth in a way incomprehensible to man anchored and subjected to sensory limitations.

II. The Mentors of Cioran's Apophatism. Dionysius the Aeropagite – Hegel – Heidegger

From the Cioranian perspective, the apophatism of Dionysius the Areopagite is inextricably linked to the Divinity. The description in limited words of the Infinite One by definition, can be achieved only by affirming in God all the predicates affirmed by analogy, while denying any form of limitation imposed by reason. Knowledge through negation does not express a character subject to logic, because the suppression of statements through negation

does not result in nihilism. It follows that the privative trait of God is by illusory deduction. Therefore, for the expression of apophatic negation, a statement related to the infinity of God is imperative. Therefore, through this type of relation one can express the truth of Divine existence above all negations and affirmations.

In Hegel's philosophy, which is based on ideas from Plato [1], all determinations of the One who is One are isolated, thus reaching the concept of pure Being, devoid of any form of determination. The fundamental danger of this indeterminacy obviously leads to the confusion between Being and nothingness. The Dionysius-Hegel parallelism brings to the fore the different way of using the negation. The analysis of Dionysian negation or apophatic character expresses the expression of an over-affirmation, being the last expressible expression without being subject to determination. In contrast, Hegel's apophatic understanding expresses the need for a relationship that necessarily leads to determination. The use of negation by Dionysius aims at drawing God into His aseity, as God exists from Himself and through Himself. Hegel's philosophy, on the other hand, pulls God out from His transcendence, unknowable and incomprehensible to creatures.

Another value of apophatism in Cioranian thought is found in Heidegger's philosophy. The work *Was ist Metaphysik (1928)* [2] expresses nothingness as separate, different from logical narration. For the German philosopher, the affective disposition in which nothing can be perceived is expressed through the fear of nothing being determined. This Heideggerian fear has no equivalent in the world of philosophy and deviates considerably from Dionysian apophatism.

III. The Apophatic Negation of Emil Cioran

Apophatic negation can be organized into three principles. The first expresses a logical, discursive apophatism, the second presupposes the resting of the mind in God, something achievable through purification, and the third principle, most clearly expressed by Dionysius the Areopagite, highlights the fullness of uncreated divine light, light that can only be expressed by the metaphor of divine darkness. By this last principle, apophatic negation removes any contradiction from God. It follows that the apophatic antinomies do not have an ontological character, they are of a cognitive nature.

In theology, which Emil Cioran had intensely studied, especially through the prism of mystics, apophatic antinomies are not the result of an intra-divine turmoil and cannot be considered the effect of a metaphysical disagreement of the divine nature, but result from the inability of our being to express in the limits of rationality, in a non-contradictory way, the reality of God's existence.

Cioran's closeness to Hegel's philosophy had a notable impact. Theological expression passes in the background, and Hegel's specific speculative tension is replaced by the existential one. The thinking of the Romanian philosopher is expressed through the struggle between theological thinking and that resulting from Hegel's philosophy. This ontological turmoil is evident in the way the creature relates to the Creator, man's need for God being equal in value to the need for the lack of God.

The analysis of this idea can only express a clear violation of what is known as the principle of non-contradiction. The whole mystical theology that he was intensely studying would take on a negative outline in Cioranian thought that does not take into account any logic. "For all that is denies and confirms the Divinity. At the same time, the curse and the prayer are equally justified. If they can be done at once - with one hand threatening and with the other making the sign of the Cross, you have come as close as to identify to the Supreme Equivocal and you seem to be God whenever you know whether you exist or not" [3].

Of course, the philosophy of the Romanian thinker regarding the knowledge of God is an apophatic one that contains another form of antinomies than those marked by classicism. Unlike Dionysius, whose apophatism expressed the ontological superlative of the Creator, Emil Cioran seeks the expression of a God who chooses to withdraw into His transcendence. The inability to philosophically penetrate the mystery of God causes him to assert aspects of Divinity's hiding in a transcendence that, on the other hand, is logically completely unacceptable from the creature's perspective.

Cioranian apophatism is not based on the impossibility of knowing God, but rather expresses the existential absence. Unlike the world of theology, which does not take God out of creation, expressing both the transcendence and immanence of the Creator, proven by incarnation and resurrection, the antinomies of the Romanian philosopher have the role of highlighting the antagonism between man and God. This antagonism emerges from his mystical sensibility, through which he becomes aware of the longing for God. Moreover, the imperfection of the human being in front of a perfect God denotes unbearable dissonances that determine Cioran to categorically deny the transcendence of theology.

It is interesting that the philosophy of the great thinker of the Romanian nation deepens the abyss of the attempt to know God and not the abyss of His light as a result of understanding the mystics. Hence the different form of apophatism he experiences.

The sadness he experiences in this path of seeking God is defining for the one who can be defined as an apologist for the catastrophe of the fall of human nature. From this fall follow dramatic consequences, in the sense that man sinks more and more into imperfection through sin and can no longer rise to the true knowledge and experience of God.

If the Dionysian apophatism used the formula of reduction, Emil Cioran's apophatism expresses the impotence of the human nature to know the Creator and transforms this impotence into a permanent contestation of God. From this can only result a permanent confrontation between human and Divine, a metaphysical conflict between man who fights for the expression of the inexpressible and God who never answers. This constant turmoil defines the consecrated formula for Cioran's philosophy, which he highlights in a single sentence: "I don't know how people can believe in God, even though I think about him every day" [4].

IV. The apophatism expressed in the theological thinking of Father Dumitru Stăniloae

IV.1. The relationship between rational (philosophical) and apophatic (theological) knowledge

The theology of Father Dumitru Stăniloae, the greatest Romanian theologian, is based, in addition to the Holy Scripture and the Holy Tradition, upon all the writings of the Holy Fathers, through whose translation he enriched the treasure of Romanian theology. In their content, the chapter on the creature's ability to know God occupies, we might say, a prominent place. Thus, the theology of knowing God, perfectly highlighted by Father Stăniloae, starts from the expression of the relationship between what can be known rationally and what goes beyond reason. If rational knowledge is limited, suprarational or apophatic knowledge complements it harmoniously.

God in His being is unknowable to human reason. Therefore, the reference to Him only on the basis of reason can be made only within one's own limits, understanding the creative and providential Cause of all that exists. Apophatic knowledge complements the former through the mysterious experience of God's presence through "world-like attributes" [5]. This form of knowledge, much deeper than the first, goes beyond the rational and raises the human being beyond the sensory, beyond the barrier imposed by words.

The relationship between the two types of knowledge is inseparable. Even if the former is limited, it cannot really say anything contrary to God. Moreover, it represents the beginning of knowledge and develops gradually through the experience of the apophatic one. The fact that these two types of knowledge cannot be separated also results from the need for apophatic experience to explain oneself in human words, intelligible to reason. The greatness of apophatic knowledge is that it is not limited to the sensory, but often overcomes the latter through actual living. Thus, if rational knowledge can speak of God's love only at the level of the intellect, through apophatic knowledge, man experiences this love directly, personally, in his being. Through this knowledge, "the human subject really lives a kind of immersion in the infinity of God, in His omnipotence, in His love" [6].

By living in God, man becomes aware of the infinity of His love on the one hand, and of the impossibility of expressing this infinity on the other. Man's rationality is overwhelmed by such an inexpressible infinity, for which he appeals to negation. But the denial of intellectual knowledge does not mean that it is something bad. Denial "always refers to what has been asserted, for one cannot rationally deny what the intellect does not consider to exist" [7].

The relationship between the two types of knowledge is not one of exclusion, but of completion. Apophatic knowledge is expressed in intelligible words by appealing to affirmative and negative knowledge - the rational one. The knowledge of God by deduction implies a limitation to the material things, while the apophatic knowledge detaches itself from any sensory limits, man experiencing God in a mystical sense. God is the Trinity of Persons, and His knowledge is personal. The two times of knowledge cannot be excluded because they have a common foundation: Supernatural revelation.

The very rationality of the world cannot be thought of as existing in itself and by itself, for this would be nonsense. It must have a Personal Subject to refer to out of absolute longing. This longing is also evident in the case of Cioran, who fights for the form of knowledge he read about in the Saints' literature. The problem is that the apophatic type of knowledge cannot be reduced to intellect, and the famous Romanian philosopher remained faithful to reason, not finding the means to combine the two forms of knowledge, as the philosopher and his friend Petre Țuțea admirably succeed. The way of overcoming strictly intellectual knowledge is expressed by St. Gregory when he says: "I came out, as one who will perceive God ... and so I penetrated the cloud that separated me from matter and material things, and I gathered myself inside me. But looking, I have barely seen the back of God ... that is, His signs after Him, like shadows and faces of the sun in the water, because it is not possible for Him to be seen, for it overwhelms the feeling with the purity of His light" [8].

Such knowledge presupposes a form of purification, of getting out of any passion so that man is not subject to any limitation. Thus, in complete freedom, man experiences "a fine spiritual sensitivity, which does not occur as long as man is possessed by bodily pleasures and passions of any kind" [9].

By the fact that theological apophatism presupposes such a preparation of man, who in the face of the impossibility of penetrating the mystery, feels the need to get out of his own insufficiency, it results that this form of knowledge is not limited to denying statements about God, but is outlined in a supernatural knowledge, by experiencing life in the will of the Creator.

IV.2. The Transparency of the Concept of Apophatic Knowledge

When we talk about the apophatic knowledge of God from a theological perspective we can say that there is a path that man must take. "Any meaning regarding God must have a fragility, a transparency, a lack of fixity, it must urge us to revoke it and to stimulate this meaning towards another, but following the same direction" [10].

God cannot be grasped by the human intellect. It follows that the meaning of the concept cannot be limited to reason, for thus we would limit God. Even in the declaration of atheism, as a result of the impossibility of rational understanding, the attention of the intellect remains focused on the concept that expresses it. Thus, although man's relation to God is not made as from person to Person, as is the case in philosophy, yet the concept of knowing the Divinity remains in the intellect, often trying to define a false god. Therefore, the concept of apophatic knowledge is meant to highlight the Creator beyond all meaning, "as highlighting sometimes with one aspect, sometimes with another of His infinite wealth" [11].

Saint Dionysius Exiguus, whose theology was well known to Emil Cioran, speaking of the limited nature of words in an attempt to express mystery, says: "This is why most of us do not believe in words that they reveal divine mysteries; for we regard them only as sensible symbols connected with them. That is why we must strip them of those of the symbols and look at them, empty and clean. If we look at them like this we will adore the source of life that moves in itself and standing in itself as a unitary, simple, self-moving, self-working power, which does not leave itself, as the knowledge of all" [12].

Limiting the intellect to words in the case of apophatic knowledge is a substantial problem. Often rational thought, unable to penetrate the mystery, remains in a form of contemplation not of God, but of the word that refers to Him, and the intellect not exceeding the word makes it God. Hence the creature's struggle to understand rationally what is beyond reason.

The key to approaching God through knowledge is to raise the feeling above the word in experiencing the mystery of the Creator and implicitly of His works. The totality of the words by which God would be accessible to the intellect "are symbols in relation to His works and to His Person as their source" [13]. The strictly rational penetration of these symbols leads the intellect to the inability to understand them, for which it ends up drawing erroneous conclusions. The fact that reason cannot penetrate the mystery, or only a small part of it, does not mean that God does not exist, but only that, strictly rationally, he can be expressed only in words that refer to Him, without including Him in the definitions, without being able to limit Him.

A particularly important aspect to be emphasized is that theology, unlike philosophy, refers to a Personal God, not to an impersonal power, and the relationship that is established between the Uncreated and the created is based on love. Through the love manifested to each other, God reveals himself to man according to his possibility of understanding and feeling, so that then man can advance in the process of knowledge. Therefore, this process is a continuous one and is fueled by the practice of virtues that brings the liberation of passions, so the freedom necessary for such knowledge.

The intensity of living in the will of God is experienced by every man according to the latter's state of purity. Thus, the most zealous attain a higher knowledge, and those who have not yet succeeded in detaching themselves from the materiality of the world, have their minds anchored in it. From here we understand once again the importance of collaboration between the two types of knowledge. In the one based strictly on the intellect, elementary, simple notions are organized, through which man forms an "image" about God, so that then, through apophatic knowledge, this image is constantly amplified in His infinity.

Seeing God, in the light of what mysticism tells us, transcends rational knowledge, which is above knowledge through negation. This apophatic knowledge transcends both affirmation and negation, but uses negation only to express in intelligible words what is expressible.

The difference between knowledge through rational negation and mystical contemplation is masterfully highlighted by St. Gregory Palamas, who says: "The view (contemplation) is different and theology is different, because it is not the same thing to say something about God

and to see God. For negative theology is also a word, and views (contemplations) are above the word” [14].

V. Conclusion

Concluding what has been highlighted, we can say that the two great Romanian thinkers met in their thought that leads to God. One, of philosophical construction, permanently aimed at overcoming the barrier imposed by the rational in the process of knowing the Absolute, this effort being a constant one, resulting from the obvious turmoil he lived every day. Emil Cioran, the nihilistic philosopher who could not refrain from intensely seeking the rational explanation of God, does not receive the mysterious answer of the Divine and reaches negative conclusions by which he cancels the existence of a Creator and Pronator. Another, Father Dumitru Stăniloae, the greatest Romanian theologian, good connoisseur of philosophy, does not limit himself to the expression of God in the limited language imposed by reason, but takes the path of the mystics and manages to theologically express the inexpressible, apophatically, a crumb of the immensity of the mysterious mystery of God. This form of theologically highlighted knowledge has its foundation in the Personal character of God and in the love relationship that can be established between the Uncreated and the created.

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